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EPA Environmental News

NO VACATION FROM AIR POLLUTION

By W. Michael McCabe

This Labor Day, millions of Americans are back from summer vacations with a new realization about their annual quest for wide open spaces and fresh country air.

While they may have been successful in finding a vacation escape, increasingly they are realizing that there is no escaping air pollution. Air quality data for 1999 shows air quality in many resort areas and small towns is just as bad or worse than in big cities.

A recent study sponsored by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Pew Charitable Trust reported some disturbing trends. The report found that the Cape Cod National Seashore has had more bad air days than Boston. It reported that the Jersey shore had as many bad air days as Newark. The report also found that Acadia National Park in supposedly pristine northern Maine had pollution levels on a par with Philadelphia.

Based on this report, you could say that the heat wave of 1999 is also a smog wave. And it's not just an urban problem.

In the mid-Atlantic region, smaller cities that formerly met federal health standards for ozone smog such as Lancaster, Pa., Richmond, Va., Sussex Co., Del., Huntington, W.Va., Reading, Pa., Hampton Roads, Va., and Virginia Beach are backsliding in 1999. Brandywine State Park in Delaware has recorded more frequent high smog levels than any place in Philadelphia. Smog levels in rural Cecil County, Md. are worse than in Baltimore.

So far this summer, Lums Pond State Park in Delaware has already exceeded the federal health-based standard for ozone smog 10 times. Shenandoah National Forest in Virginia has had seven smoggy days, while the Virginia Beach area has had 12 smoggy days.

How can this be? In addition to hot weather, there are three reasons for the smog wave of 1999. First, pollution knows no boundaries. Ozone smog and it's ingredients can travel hundreds of miles upon the prevailing winds. Secondly, we make the problem worse by driving more miles than ever before. And finally, we're driving more sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and light trucks, which pollute more than regular cars.

Ozone smog forms on hot sunny days when nitrogen oxides from power plants, factories and vehicles, combine with volatile organic compounds from auto exhaust and other sources. Ozone in the stratosphere serves a useful function in filtering out cancer causing ultra-violet rays. But at ground level, high concentrations of ozone smog are a serious health risk.

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Ozone smog is a caustic gas which irritates eyes and nasal passages, and has a sunburn-like effect on our lungs. In an average year in the U.S., smog is responsible for 15,000 premature deaths, one million respiratory problems, and 400,000 asthma attacks. We used to think we could escape these health risks by getting away from the cities to breathe fresh air. But ozone has followed us to the countryside, seashore and mountains.

Last fall, EPA took a bold step to reduce the migration of ozone smog, calling on 22 states to reduce smog-forming nitrogen oxides from power plants. But several midwestern states and utility companies challenged EPA in court, and won a temporary delay.

Meanwhile, residential communities are sprawling farther from cities. In the mid-Atlantic states, the number of vehicle miles traveled has more than doubled in the past 20 years. This "Los Angelisation" of America is blocking progress toward cleaner air, ironically even as cars themselves are getting cleaner.

The best hope for a solution to sprawl is a public that becomes so fed up with traffic and smog that it demands changes, just as public opinion has shifted against smoking and drunk driving and in favor of recycling.

Citizens can demand housing closer to work, better mass transit, and more open space. The Clinton Administration's Partnership for Clean Air, which provides resources to local governments and community organizations to maintain open space, is an important step in that direction. We can also bring pressure to bear on local governments to end sprawl, with zoning power and by controlling access to water and sewer hookups.

The third piece of the ozone problem is the increasing popularity of SUVs. Current regulations permit an SUV to spew two-to-five times as much pollution into our air as a sedan.

EPA is currently proposing to require SUVs, minivans and pickup trucks to meet the same protective air quality standards as passenger cars. EPA also wants to lower the sulfur content of gasoline to help emission control technologies to work better. This would make passenger cars 77 percent cleaner than those on the road today, and SUVs would be 95 percent cleaner.

There is no getting around the fact that 1999 is a bad summer for air pollution. Scientists believe that the current warming trend will be with us for some time, so we can't look at this year's pollution problems as a weather-based exception to the norm.

Since we cannot control the weather, reducing emissions from power plants, vehicles and urban sprawl are crucial ways to prevent future heat waves from becoming smog waves. It's not like we can just leave town to get away from dirty air. Ozone smog is everywhere.

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